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ABSTRACT

Due to controversy over what constitutes an appropriate kindergarten curriculum, parents were asked directly what they wanted kindergarten to provide for their children. A 15-item questionnaire focusing on common kindergarten teaching practices was sent to parents of kindergarten children who attended 100 elementary schools in South Dakota. Content of questionnaire items ranged from highly organized formal teaching approaches such as teaching beginning reading to developmental activities such as time for free play. Information dealing with sex of respondent, type of family, and eduational level was also requested from the parent. Space was provided for the parent respondent to add comments. Over 2,200 questionnaires from 92 schools were returned. Results indicated parents wanted schools to provide a kindergarten curriculum with both academic and developmental components. Teaching phonics and the alphabet, and teaching counting and number recognition were the two common kindergarten teaching practices considered most necessary. A total of 30 percent or more of the parents considered it to be unnecessary to teach social studies, science, or to provide sizeable blocks of time for free play. (RH)

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Kindergarten: What Do Parents Want?

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ABSTRACT

Kindergarten: What Do Parents Want?

With all the current concern and controversy about what constitutes an appropriate kindergarten curriculum it was decided to ask parents directly what they wanted for their children.

A fifteen-item questionnaire was sent to kindergarten parents in 100 elementary schools. Over twenty two hundred forms were returned. Results indicated parents wanted phonics, reading and math, but they wanted their children to have the traditional kindergarten experiences as well. The implications are that a lot of work will be required to change existing patterns but channels of communication with parents must be kept open and functioning.

Kindergarten: What Do Parents Want?

Nothing causes more debate among elementary and early childhood educators than the current tendency to offer a highly academic, formal, workbook-oriented curriculum in kindergarten. Early childhood educators are aware that young children don't learn or think in the same way that older children do, yet for years there has been a steady drift toward pressurized, formal instruction in kindergarten. Reading, math and handwriting are taught in a highly structured, systematic manner in many kindergartens throughout the country.

There is no lack of authoritative published material decrying the situation that exists in today's kindergarten classroom. Elkind (1986) published an article in which he eloquently explained what has happened in early childhood education, and he outlined the short term dangers of placing great academic stress on children by deviating from ". . . the natural mode of learning of the young child" (p. 635). He suggests long-term effects can be even more damaging, destroying the child's natural mode of spontaneous learning and thus hurting future learning motivation, perhaps permanently. Elkind (1986) believes that "we are in a war for the well-being of our children . . ."(p. 636) and we must fight increasingly harder to stem the "miseducation" imposed on young children today.

A statement prepared by the Early Childhood and Literacy Development Committee of the International Reading Association

(IRA) entitled "Literacy Development and Pre-First Grade" (1986) presented a list of nine serious concerns about early reading instruction including lack of attention to individual children's needs, too much attention given to related skill development and abstract reading, too little attention given to reading for fun, pressure for high scores on tests and teachers not adequately prepared for teaching young children who actually use inappropriate methods and materials. Again the concern about the effects of early reading on young children is evident.

Constance Kamii (1986), an avid proponent of Piaget's teachings, has written numerous research-based treatises on early childhood education. Among them is one in which she deplores workbooks and assures her readers that number concepts must be experienced by young children in a concrete fashion. She goes so far as to say ". . . workbooks are harmful for first graders' development of arithmetic, while play is highly beneficial" (p. 6). If workbooks are detrimental to first graders it is a certainty that they must have a negative effect on kindergarteners.

Going along with the emphasis on the "3R's" is the trend toward mandatory kindergarten attendance,and under the more is better notion we see many school districts moving to full-day kindergarten programs. Again, early childhood educators have tried to make clear that "obviously, the quantity of time spent in school is far less significant than the quality of the

kindergarten experience" (Jalongo, 1956, p. 157).

It may be assumed that today's ambitious young parents want an increasingly academic program for their kindergarten children in order to help them succeed in the competitive world of later schooling and life.

In order to determine if this assumption was correct the investigators decided to collect information from parents of kindergarten children in South Dakota to determine their opinions toward common kindergarten teaching practices.

Method

The Sample

One hundred elementary schools in South Dakota were randomly selected to participate in this study. Letters were sent to the principal of each school to ascertain interest in participating. Ninety two responded positively.

Instrument Development

The investigators developed a questionnaire consisting of 15 common kindergarten teaching practices. The items ranged from highly organized formal teaching approaches such as teaching beginning reading to more developmental activities such as time for freeplay. Information was also requested from the parent completing the questionnaire dealing with sex of respondent, type of family and educational level. Space was provided for the parent repondent to add comments. The questionnaire was field-tested with parents of kindergarten children not selected

for inclusion in this study.

Procedures

The appropriate number of questionnaires, instructions for the principal and teachers, and a letter to the parents of the kindergarten children were mailed to the elementary principals of the cooperating schools. Each kindergarten teacher was requested to send home with each child a questionnaire and letter to the parents. The teacher was requested to wait for two weeks and then return the completed forms to the investigators. It was suggested that the teacher remind the students to have their parents return the questionnaires. Following these procedures 2269 questionnaires were returned for analysis.

When the questionnaires were received by the investigators a trained elementary education undergraduate student tabulated the results and recorded comments. Percentages were determined.

A profile of the parent respondents indicated the survey was completed primarily by women. The majority of the families represented were two-parent families, and most respondents had a high school diploma, often with some post-secondary education.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the questionnaire survey with parent responses toward common kindergarten teaching practices reported in percentage form.

Insert Table 1 here

The results of the study revealed that parents of kindergarten children believed that the majority of the common kindergarten practices listed on the questionnaire were necessary for inclusion in the curriculum with the possible exception of two items. It appears that parents want a curriculum with both academic strength as well as developmental activities.

Teaching phonics and the alphabet, and teaching counting and number recognition were the two common kindergarten teaching practices considered most necessary. One hundred percent of the parents stated that these two items were very necessary or necessary for inclusion in the kindergarten curriculum. Other teaching practices deemed highly necessary were language development through rhymes, games, finger-plays, songs, etc.; learning to sit still, and do seat work; teaching health, safety and nutrition; beginning handwriting instruction; daily physical activities, exercise; books and stories read to young children daily; and teaching with manipulative materials such as clay and puzzles, etc.

Two items, teaching social studies and science lessons and sizeable blocks of time for freeplay were considered unnecessary by 30 percent or more of the responding parents.

It appears that parents of kindergarten children want a highly academic program as well as developmental activities. A majority of the parents felt that each of the fifteen items listed on the questionnaire were necessary for inclusion into the

kindergarten curriculum.

When completing the questionnaire, parents were given the opportunity to add their own comments in regard to the kindergarten program. A majority of the parents took advantage of this opportunity to express their opinions and some diverse comments emerged.

Most comments indicated that parents were pleased with the curriculum, school, and teacher. Many parent's remarks referred to emphasis upon the "basics" such as phonics, the alphabet and early reading skills. Numerous comments dealt with the acquisition of affective skills such as friendship, cooperation, self-esteem and responsibility. In addition, comments were received that reflected today's social, ecomomic, and political climate with requests for teaching patriotism, computer skills, foreign language, protection from strangers, and even requests for prayer in the schools. Only a few negative comments were received.

Discussion

The major finding of this study was that parents of kindergarten children want both academic and developmental activities for their children. It is difficult to reconcile the great number of requests for both academic and developmental kindergarten programs. The comments from parents further complicate the overall picture. The only possible way to synthesize this information is to recognize that parents want

everything presently offered in kindergarten and more.

With the current emphasis on parent involvement, we must continue to ask parents for their opinions and suggestions. Open communication with parents is necessary if we are to improve the kindergarten curriculum of the future.

Note

The authors wish to thank The South Dakota teachers and parents who participated in this kindergarten study and helped us learn more about what parents want from the kindergarten program. We thank Julie Bertrand, an undergraduate elementary education major in the School of Education at The Univesity of South Dakota, who enthusiastically assisted in this study by serving as the questionnaire tabulator.

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Table 1

Parent Responses to Common Kindergarten Teaching Practices

Type of Kindergarten Teaching Practice	Degrees of Necessity			
	1	2	3	4
1. Teaching phonics and the alphabet	---	---	22%	78%
2. Teaching beginning reading	1%	14%	50%	35%
3. Teaching counting and number recognition	---	---	21%	79%
4. Teaching basic math combinations	2%	20%	51%	27%
5. Beginning handwriting instruction	1%	5%	38%	56%
6. Sizeable blocks of time for freeplay	3%	27%	47%	23%
7. Learning to sit still, and do seat work	---	3%	47%	50%
8. Daily physical activities, exercise	---	6%	48%	46%
9. Language development through rhymes, games, finger-plays, songs, etc.	---	2%	41%	57%

(table continues)

Type of Kindergarten Teaching Practice	Degree of Necessity			
	1	2	3	4
10. Teaching with manipulative materials such as clay and puzzles, etc.	---	7%	56%	37%
11. Books and stories read to young children easily	---	6%	42%	52%
12. Freedom to choose among varied play activities	1%	14%	61%	24%
13. Creative art experiences with varied media - paint, crayons, etc.	---	2%	56%	42%
14. Teaching health, safety and nutrition	---	5%	49%	46%
15. Teaching social studies and science lessons	12%	35%	42%	11%

Note. 1 = Completely Unnecessary; 2 = Unnecessary; 3 = Necessary; 4 = Very Necessary